# Reading Historical Photographs: What Can We See, What Can We Learn?

GPO HISTORY TALK

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What Can We See, What Can we Learn?

- GPO's historical photograph collection has something on the order of 10,000 images in prints, negatives, slides, and digital files.
- One of the responsibilities of the historian is to make the photos available, and to provide accurate, interesting information that illuminates and interprets the photos.

What Can We See, What Can we Learn?

- There is a well-established set of techniques among historians and photography experts for looking and and interpreting photos.
- The framework has three elements:
  - Observe
  - Reflect
  - Query

What Can We See, What Can we Learn?

- OBSERVE Identify factual details
- REFLECT Form and test hypotheses
- QUERY Develop questions to gain further understanding

#### OBSERVE

- Look at the factual information the photo provides (who, what, when where)
- Describe what is visible | What do you notice first? | What people and objects are shown? | How are they arranged? | What is the setting? | Are there any textual clues visible (words, signs, etc.?) | Are there details you cannot identify?

#### REFLECT

- Think in more abstract terms about the photo, add other knowledge to what we can see.
- Why was is taken? | How was it composed? | Why was the image made? | What's happening in the image? | When was it made? | Who was the intended audience?

- Synthesize the explicit (what we can see), the implicit (what is known but not visible), and the unknown.
- What's missing from the photo? | What happened a moment before the shot was captured? A moment after? | What do you wonder about after seeing the image?

"Parts" of Photos

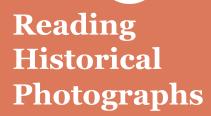
- Photographs are made up of
  - oComposition (what the photographer grouped together in the frame)
  - Capture of a moment (is there action or activity?)
  - Setting
  - Focal point (what's in the center or in focus, what's the important object or statement?)

# Reading Historical Photographs CONTEXT

- Many elements give a photo its context
- Photos are composed by the photographer, much like writing or drawing.
- Elements are consciously included, excluded, emphasized

### The GPO Collection

- GPO's historical photos are documentary, but for the most part not of events (at least prior to the 1960s).
- Their intention is mostly pretty clear: to record and promote the largest printing plant in the world.



## The GPO Collection

- There is a historical arc:
  - •Few or none pre-1890
  - oRelatively few 1890 − 1920
  - An explosion of photos1920 1940
  - Fewer during and just after World War II
  - oCharacter of subjects changes by mid-50s (more events, less plant)
  - •Now largely event-based

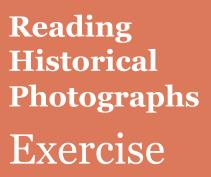
## The GPO Collection

- A simple filing system was put in place many years ago, relying on the agency organizational chart.
   80 90% are identified with at least an organizational unit, rarely names of people, and only sometimes a date.
- That system has been expanded to provide a bit more ready detail
- There are almost always multiple copies of each print.
- Many have appeared in GPO publications

### TRY A BRIEF EXERCISE TO DEMONSTRATE THE

**OBSERVE <-> REFLECT <->QUERY** 

**FRAMEWORK** 



 Take a couple of minutes to closely examine the photo on the following slide

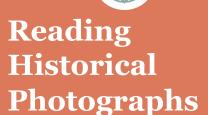


Now, list everything you can say with certainty ("I see. . ." rather than "This might be . . . ")



What is the central or focal item? What most prominently draws your attention?





Reflect

#### Answer these questions:

- Why was the photo taken? What was its purpose?
- When was it taken? How can you tell?
- Where was it taken? How do you know?
- What happened one minute after the photographer snapped the picture? One minute before?

The original identification assigned to this photo is that it shows the production of postal money orders in Building 4, 1940s. That identification was based on one piece of documented information (that it was the money order section) and on judgements based on observation.



Eventually, another photo came to light, clearly the same setting, with a definite date of 1933. A problem since Building 4 wasn't built yet.



 The second photo, although obviously the same location, is a different view. Based on further research, we determined that it was taken in part of the old GPO building, now demolished, located where Building 3 now sits. An exterior shot of the rooftops of the old building, taken from Building 2, reveals an extension with a roof and clerestory pattern that matches what is visible from the inside here.

It's necessary to query and test asumptions throughout. Both shots are of Money Order Section, old building, mid-1930s





• This technique can be applied to most any photo. Give it a try!

• Observe <--- > Reflect < --- > Query